

UNDERSTANDING

# Maine Inside Out

As a Model for Social and Emotional Learning and Community  
Resilience Building

A Policy and Practice Brief

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

Maine Inside Out (MIO) is a nonprofit arts organization based in Portland, Maine founded in 2007. Since 2009, the organization has facilitated theater workshops within Maine’s juvenile correctional facility, Long Creek Youth Development Center (“Long Creek”), and has since expanded programming to include a greater focus on reintegration and community building outside of facilities. Working with youth both inside and outside of facilities, and with multiple community groups of formerly incarcerated and justice involved youth, MIO creates and shares original works of theater across the state of Maine.

## Mission

Maine Inside Out initiates dialogue, develops leadership, and builds community across boundaries with collaborative original theater, inside and outside correctional facilities. We are committed to dismantling all forms of oppression and building a movement for transformative justice in our communities.

MIO has gained national attention<sup>1</sup> for offering an innovative model for social and emotional learning (SEL) that effectively engages justice-involved youth. SEL is particularly vital to community reintegration of youth after incarceration. Young people who have been incarcerated experience many obstacles in their transition back into communities, in addition to the challenges normally experienced by emerging adults.<sup>2</sup>



Youth incarceration **decreases** the likelihood of high school graduation by **13 percentage points**



Youth incarceration **increases** the likelihood of adult incarceration by **22 percentage points**

Source: Aizer, A. and Doyle Jr., J. (2015). “Juvenile Incarceration, Human Capital, and Future Crime: Evidence from Randomly Assigned Judges.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* Vol. 130, No. 2.

MIO focuses on community building in several locations in the state of Maine, including in four of Maine’s most populous communities: Portland, Lewiston, Biddeford, and Waterville. The activities are aimed at educating the public about youth incarceration and youth justice, increasing support from key stakeholders and policy makers, developing social networks for justice-involved youth as well as supporting youth to organize for social change in their home communities. To further increase support from stakeholders and grow social networks for MIO participants, MIO has developed and is continually building strong partnerships across many sectors including: public education, arts,

advocacy, philanthropy, faith, human services, government, and community organizations. These activities within the network of these partnerships serve a critical

<sup>1</sup> Beyer, L. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning and Traditionally Underserved Populations [policy brief]. American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from <http://www.aypf.org/resources/SEL-special-populations/>

<sup>2</sup> Mears, D. and Travis, J. (2004). Youth Development and Reentry. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, Vol 2 (1).

need, as youth in Maine who have been incarcerated have been found to experience stigma as a result of justice system involvement.<sup>3</sup> Involvement in the justice system has been demonstrated nationally to impede academic<sup>4</sup>, health<sup>5</sup>, and employment<sup>6</sup> outcomes for youth. According to one national study, incarceration decreases the likelihood of high school graduation and increases the likelihood of recidivism into the adult system<sup>7</sup>.

The purpose of this report is to describe how Maine Inside Out has implemented programming, focusing on the two areas of SEL and community building. The data illustrated in this report is preliminary and aims to create a framework for MIO to establish a basis for further research and development of programming to expand its reach and scope. Additionally, this report seeks to inform other systems, organizations, and individuals who may be interested in adopting or developing a program, service, or intervention model similar to what MIO is currently delivering to youth in the state of Maine.



<sup>3</sup> Hawes, S., et al. (2016) *Unsealed Fate: The Unintended Consequences of Inadequate Safeguarding of Juvenile Records in Maine*. Retrieved from <https://muskie.usm.maine.edu/justiceresearch/Publications/Juvenile/UnsealedFate.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Widdowson, A. Siennick, S. and Hay, C. (2016) The implications of arrest for college enrollment: an analysis of long-term effects and mediating mechanisms. *Criminology*, Vol. 54(4).

<sup>5</sup> Barnert, E., Perry, R., and Morris, R. (2016). Juvenile Incarceration and Health. *Academic Pediatrics*, Vol 16(2).

<sup>6</sup> Sharlein, J. (2016) Beyond Recidivism: Investigating Comparative Educational and Employment Outcomes for Adolescents in the Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems. *Crime & Delinquency*, Vol 64(1).

<sup>7</sup> Aizer, A., and Doyle, J. (2015) "Juvenile Incarceration, Human Capital and Future Crime: Evidence from Randomly-Assigned Judges." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol 130(2).

# MIO Programming

MIO provides two core types of programming: inside Long Creek and outside in the community. MIO programming consists of collaborative group work projects. Inside Long Creek, these projects are primarily the creation of original theater pieces. In the communities within which MIO is based, work projects are determined by the group and have included: creation of original theater, design and hosting of community events such as a monthly open mic, a District Attorney candidate forum, organizational decision-making, participation in community coalitions, and preparation for various workshop and/or speaking engagements.

In addition to facilitating and supporting logistics for group work projects, MIO provides adjacent programming to support participants navigating the transition post-incarceration, continued system-involvement, and the growing scope of community work projects. The following are categories of adjacent programming that MIO provides:

- **Compensation and transport**
  - Participation in MIO work projects is compensated with stipends
  - Transport to MIO meetings is provided or reimbursed
- **System support**
  - Advocacy letters
  - Communication with lawyers
  - Assistance with obtaining ID, birth certificate and social security card
  - Presence (as requested) at court dates, probation meetings, classification meetings, and pretrial services
- **Employment**
  - Job referrals
  - Job references
  - Connection with workers' rights advocates

## 2018 MIO COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING OVERVIEW

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### COMMUNITY GROUPS

Five community groups in Portland, Biddeford, Lewiston, and Waterville

198

### TOTAL MEETINGS

Twenty-four in Portland, twenty-five in Biddeford, twenty-three in Lewiston, fourteen in Waterville and thirty-three all group leadership meetings

29

### PUBLIC EVENTS

Thirteen public performances, eight open mic events, five workshops and three community events

1430

### TOTAL ATTENDANCE

Fifty-eight distinct meeting participants and fourteen newly contracted participants

- **Housing**
  - Security deposits for housing
  - Housing references
- **Transitional support**
  - Transportation to hospital, work, probation, court, and other locations
  - Connections with caseworkers and social services contacts
- **Mentoring**
  - County jail visits and/or mail correspondence
  - Individual meetings/phone calls
- **Training**
  - Six-week yoga program
  - Regular trainings on various subjects including communication and advocacy skills, self-care, theater, dance, writing, performance methods, group facilitation, conflict resolution, transformative justice, and other topics

## Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the MIO Approach

Social and Emotional learning is a method by which individuals build the understanding and ability to process emotions, create and reach healthy targets or decisions, and experience and express empathy.<sup>8</sup> The

MIO performance creation process maps in general to the core SEL skills. To create theater pieces, MIO participants process their stories and significant experiences together (understanding and ability to process emotions), create a play or a performance piece for a scheduled public event (create and reach targets or decisions) and then support each other to process these stories or performances (experience and express empathy.)

Research, theory, and practice relating to SEL has existed for decades, with substantial evidence that SEL contributes to academic success, increased self-efficacy and self-confidence, healthier relationships with peers and adults,

### Process

A MIO inside workshop has recognizable phases and goals. These phases often overlap during the 6-12 week process:

- 1) Building group trust and support
- 2) Creative content
- 3) Centering on a theme and figuring out a structure
- 4) Preparing for a public performance and discussion
- 5) Celebrating group work and individual accomplishment

<sup>8</sup> Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2018). *What is SEL?* [website] Retrieved from <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

greater likelihood of career success, decreased likelihood of criminal behavior, and increased civic engagement.<sup>9</sup> Because of the complex nature of these skills, researchers have been challenged in how both to measure their development in individuals and how to determine the best methods to support that development.<sup>10</sup> This challenge is intensified when considering how to apply SEL interventions to justice involved youth, since the majority of justice involved youth face negative experiences that impede SEL.<sup>11</sup>

One review of studies focused on SEL among adolescents states that successful programs include one of three approaches:

- Utilizes the adolescents' developmental need for respect or status
- Constructs an atmosphere that respects adolescent autonomy
- Applies the incremental theory of personality<sup>12</sup>

MIO's model draws on each of these approaches in its design and implementation. The focus on theater engages justice involved and formerly justice involved youth to build SEL skills like self-awareness, self-management or autonomy, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making skills. Further research is needed to tie MIO activities to the building of each of these core SEL competencies.

## DEVELOPMENTAL NEED FOR RESPECT OR STATUS

There is a democratic structure to the MIO groups and activities, for both the groups inside LC and outside in the community. In both settings, youth engaged in MIO programming are able to operate in a climate which is intentionally structured, so they feel respected and valued. Participants in MIO programming may have histories in systems and spaces that limit and control, and in which isolation and silencing are commonplace. In contrast, MIO encourages free participant expression and use of voice. For example, most decisions are collaborative, and at meetings all participants are provided with space to talk using a "talking piece" in circle. This custom is borrowed from indigenous cultures and ensures that everyone has the opportunity to share with and be heard by the group. Talking pieces are also objects that hold significance for MIO groups, either because they are made by program participants in LC's carpentry program or discovered by community participants in their community work. Another core MIO practice is for each member of the group to respond when a participant shares a new creative work, providing that participant with acknowledgment, attention, and feedback. Disagreements, disputes, and conflict are negotiated with reactions that recognize both individual and collective needs of the group while encouraging accountability and responsibility. With these methods, MIO curriculum taps into developmental needs for respect and status within this age group.

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<sup>9</sup> Durlak, C., et al. (2015) *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*. The Guilford Press: New York.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, S and Doolittle, E. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue. *The Future of Children*, Vol. 27 (1).

<sup>11</sup> Beyer, L. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning and Traditionally Underserved Populations [policy brief]. American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from <http://www.aypf.org/resources/set-special-populations/>

<sup>12</sup> Yeager, D. (2017). Social-Emotional Learning Programs for Adolescents. *The Future of Children*, Vol. 27 (1)

FACILITATION OF AUTONOMY

Autonomy of participants is built in to all MIO programming and curriculum. Youth participation in MIO groups inside of LC and outside in the community is voluntary. Each MIO group creates its own conduct and value agreements as well as original theater pieces. Group agreements are open for adjustment at any time and intended to evolve organically with the needs of group members. Curriculum and activities are designed to foster autonomy on the part of participants. One example of successful group building that is a key process for theater creation is a “sculpting” activity in which participants create physical shapes with the bodies of other participants. For one part of this activity, participants pair up and sculpt each other in response to prompts like: “think about a compliment you’ve received that helps define you.” In completing the activity, each MIO participant must make decisions about how to communicate using only the physical form of another participant, creating independent symbolism and figuring out how to move and interact with participants nonverbally in ways that foster respect, connection and acknowledgment of a shared experience without assistance from facilitators. Prompts themselves are often generated through discussion of challenges or problems faced, analyzing root cause and effects which then become the basis of prompts for later activities. During any given activity, there may be opportunities for participants and staff to engage in the practice of self-reflection, mindfulness, empathy, nonviolent communication, collaboration, negotiation, and cooperation. These opportunities are not planned or structured, but rather facilitated by staff as well as participants, and fundamental to the way in which the programming runs. The built-in process to accomplish the group goal is driven by the initiative and leadership of group participants. The facilitators hold the dual roles of observing and reflecting back a participant led process. Performances in the facility and in the community further support self-confidence and identity formation.

MIO hosts **release ceremonies** for inside program participants prior to their release. These gatherings of MIO facilitators and participant peers creates a circle of support for the transitioning participant and builds a bridge to the MIO community groups.

## INCREMENTAL THEORY OF PERSONALITY

The incremental theory of personality is the belief that personality traits are malleable.<sup>13</sup> When adolescents feel that personality traits are malleable they are more resilient, less affected by external obstacles and barriers, and more able to manage negative reactions.<sup>14</sup> MIO participants progress from being justice involved, labeled as ‘delinquent’ or ‘criminal,’ to performing original, collaboratively written theater pieces both inside facilities and out in communities. The independent development of material and opportunities for public performances supports the cultivation of self-confidence and the adjustment of participants’ identities to those of ‘performers,’ ‘community members,’ and ‘leaders.’ When participants witness the power of their stories to move audiences and affect change, they have the opportunity to reframe their system-involvement as a source of resiliency and expertise. Additional curriculum activities similarly encourage participants to think outside of a static personality framework. For example, a ten minute “popcorn” activity of rapid fire statement completion (example statement: “When I was a little kid, I wanted to be a\_\_\_when I grew up” or “Everything changed when...” or “I come from...””) provides a chance for participants to reflect on the way they saw themselves in the past and how that self-identity has changed, while listening to and seeing that same transformative process in others. These activities often result in material used in future MIO performances. Every MIO workshop inside LC concludes with a celebratory meal and circle where participants speak individually to each of their peers. This process creates structure for participants to name and appreciate the work and transformation they have witnessed in their peers, and also hear their own work and transformation named. All relationships within MIO programming are collaborative, based on creating original theater and performance. This allows youth participants in Maine Inside Out programming to assume new identities: performer, community member, leader. The development of leadership skills and the ability to put those skills into practice benefits both the youth and the communities to which they return.

Participation in SEL programs has been connected to positive outcomes in SEL skill development, pro-social attitudes and behavior, academic performance and wellbeing<sup>15</sup>. However, additional research is needed to fully demonstrate how MIO programming enables the development of SEL, the preliminary findings discussed in this paper point to MIO programming as a promising SEL model for youth with experience of the justice system.

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<sup>13</sup> Yeager, D. (2017). Social-Emotional Learning Programs for Adolescents. *The Future of Children*, Vol. 27 (1)

<sup>14</sup> Yeager, D. (2017). Social-Emotional Learning Programs for Adolescents. *The Future of Children*, Vol. 27 (1)

<sup>15</sup> Dymnicki, A., Sambolt, M., and Kidron, Y. (2013). *Improving College and Career Readiness by Incorporating Social and Emotional Learning*. College and Career Readiness and Success Center at American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/y7t7e8m4>

# Community Building and the MIO

## Approach

Another area where preliminary data suggests that MIO programming is having an impact is in community building. Building community is embedded in MIO's mission and central to the MIO philosophy and approach. It also comes directly out of MIO's pedagogical lineage, which traces back to the Theatre of the Oppressed and other arts-based movements for social change.

### BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH PERFORMANCE

In addition to consciously supporting the social and emotional learning of justice involved youth both inside and outside of LC, MIO offers a variety of programming that targets community engagement and involvement. MIO is

grounded in the belief that by sharing lived experiences of system involvement through performance and participating in community engagement and advocacy, system involved youth can decrease the stigma and improve outcomes for themselves and the community. Research has shown first person stories and perspectives to be more effective at decreasing negative stereotypes and assumptions made about individuals<sup>16</sup>. Advocacy has also been theorized to assist individuals with confronting and overcoming stigma<sup>17</sup>, and involvement in advocacy has been found to be associated with successful transition to the community<sup>18</sup>. MIO supports participants to share first person stories and lived experiences through performances, "open mics," workshops, panel presentations, and other public demonstrations. MIO participants can be involved in advocacy through any of these same activities, and the encouragement of self-advocacy is a cornerstone of the multiple ways in which MIO supports participants. For example, MIO participants, not staff, are the primary recruiters for new members. Prior research also posits that organizations that embed themselves within communities establish and strengthen

MIO ties its lineage to Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), which was developed by radical dramatist Augusto Boal starting in the 1950s through work with worker populations in Latin America. Boal was influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, German Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht and Russian theater director and actor Konstantin Stanislavski. TO seeks to inspire social change through tools that facilitate actors and spectators to participate in **historical analysis and explore** solutions to collective struggles.

<sup>16</sup>Broockman, D. and Kalla, J. (2016). Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing. *Science, Vol 352*(6282). The American Association of the Advancement of Science.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> LeBel, T. (2009). Formerly Incarcerated Persons' Use of Advocacy/Activism as a Coping Orientation in the Reintegration Process. In B. Veysey, Johnna Christian and D. Martinez (Eds.), *How Offenders Transform Their Lives* (pp.165-187). Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.

connections between individuals within that community, which leads to greater social cohesion<sup>19</sup>. Organizations that offer services within communities have been linked to greater civic engagement and social efficacy in communities<sup>20</sup>.

As evidenced in data collection activities undertaken by MIO, public performances engage community members in ways that shift perspectives around incarcerated youth. MIO collected feedback data from audience members at three performances in the 2016-2017 performance cycle. Two-hundred and sixty nine (269) responses have been collected in a questionnaire, twenty-seven (27) were solicited through feedback cards, and eleven (11) were recorded in audio booths, for a total of three hundred and seven (307) responses. From this preliminary data, the two most common themes in responses are:

- Feelings of gratitude, often coupled with expressions of inspiration
- A shift in perspective

Another theme encountered was identification of incarceration as an ‘important issue,’ but this theme occurred to a lesser degree.

## INSPIRED TO ACTION

The most common response from audience members across implemented data collection methods is gratitude, often coupled with expressions of inspiration or a desire to get more involved. As one audience member states, “these amazingly wise young adults inspire me to no end and I don’t know where I’m gonna take this but I’m gonna try to help.” Another audience member responds, “So inspirational and so much talent!

“Thank you your sharing  
your strength”

– MIO Audience Member

Thank you for sharing.” Yet another states: “it moves me and all of us to action.” It can be surmised that expressions of gratitude indicate a positive response by audience members to MIO performances, and by extension, a greater receptivity to the justice involved youth who are performing. Feelings of inspiration, especially when that inspiration includes a desire to take action, may also indicate the potential these performances have to build community. Further research is needed to understand whether or not community members who attend MIO performances are more or less likely to take action on youth justice issues, hire justice involved youth, or behave in any way that would lessen the stigma of justice involved youth in their communities.

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<sup>19</sup> Sharkey, P., Torrats-Espinosa, G., and Takyar, D. (2017). Community and the Crime Decline: The Causal Effect of Local Nonprofits on Violent Crime. *American Sociological Review*, Vol 82 (6).

<sup>20</sup> Sampson, R., et al. (2005). Civil Society Reconsidered: The Durable Nature and Community Structure of Collective Civic Action. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 111 (3).

## A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

Although the data on audience reactions did not specifically ask audience members to discuss whether their minds were changed or perspective had shifted, this was

**“It challenged my perceptions  
of incarcerated people”**

– MIO Audience Member

another common theme found in audience member responses. As one audience member states, the performance they attended “changed my views of incarcerated youth and opened my eyes to what is happening outside of my small bubble I live in.” Several other audience members echo these statements at this and other performances. One audience member adds: “I realized I do have stereotypes, but this performance helps breaking them down.” Yet another audience member reports: “This event made me more aware of youth incarceration – I now strongly believe that youth incarceration is the exact opposite of what youth need.” It is significant that even though there were no questions specifically asking about audience members’ perspectives on incarceration one of the two most common responses to the show were statements related to a perspective shift or a change of mind regarding the subject of incarceration or incarcerated individuals.

The limited data collection efforts thus far suggest that MIO’s public performances, open mics, workshops and panels are effectively orientating, engaging and involving community to achieve greater understanding of youth with lived experience of the justice system. Further evaluation is needed to establish the extent in which MIO programming leads to a reduction of stigma toward formerly incarcerated populations in the state of Maine or other impacts the MIO is having on audience members and larger communities.

# Recommendations

## FUTURE RESEARCH

This report outlines several areas for future research. Currently, there are limited evidence based programs supported by peer-reviewed research that can be pointed to as a model for SEL promotion or skills delivery within youth justice settings<sup>21</sup>. A randomized control trial involving MIO could discern whether the MIO model is an evidence-based practice. There is a need for further and more formalized research to discover how MIO is changing minds of audience members regarding incarceration and reducing stigma for formerly incarcerated populations in communities, which could have implications at both the local and national level.

Anecdotal reports of MIO participants express feelings of being ‘part of something bigger than oneself’ or contributing to a ‘larger mission’. Further data is needed to understand how participation in MIO programming may shift participant focus from self-interest to a more prosocial outlook.

Youth involved in MIO’s outside programming have exposure to peers with shared experiences, providing the opportunity for transitional mentoring, peer support, and the trust building that occurs with others who have experienced similar hardships and obstacles. Peer relationships, especially with prosocial peers, have been connected with increased prosocial behavior in adolescents<sup>22</sup>. More research is needed to understand how peer relationships and peer support impact MIO participants.

MIO’s connection to previous theater-based movements for social change is another important area for future exploration, especially since MIO is currently expanding activities to include a greater emphasis on community organizing and activism. The historical connections between performance and activism can provide context for MIO’s potential impact on the youth justice landscape in Maine.

## DEVELOPMENT

Additional research will require resource development and capacity building. MIO has expanded data collection efforts in the past year and is building a more robust feedback and evaluation strategy. Newly implemented data collection includes online response surveys, interactive audience response methods, tracking of participant attendance and compensation, tracking of staff support activities, and tracking of community engagement activities. MIO has ambitions to gather more large-scale demographic data, measure peer support, and increase participant involvement in data collection. These efforts will demand increased funding and staffing.

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<sup>21</sup> Tolan, P., Nichols, E. and DuVal, N. (2015). “SEL Programs for Juvenile Justice Settings and Populations” in Durlak, J., et. al. *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

<sup>22</sup> Barry, C., and Wentzel, K. (2006). Friend influence on prosocial behavior: The role of motivational factors and friendship characteristics. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(1).

The MIO model is one that could be applied to other contexts in which youth populations may be experiencing the negative impacts of system involvement and may benefit from programming that fosters SEL and community building. Residential treatment facilities and youth shelters are both places in which populations of youth with experience of system involvement may benefit from programming modeled after MIO's. Such expansion involves partnership with youth serving systems as well as resources.

## Conclusion

When a child is incarcerated in the state of Maine, they have been removed, ejected, and many times failed by every major public system: the family system, the educational system, the child welfare system, and often the mental health care system. The last remaining system to “catch” vulnerable youth is the juvenile justice system, and it is the only system in the state of Maine that never says ‘no’. But the youth who are ‘caught’ are often disconnected from the relationships they had with caregivers and other adults in previous systems, which contributes to fragmentation and a lack of consistency in many young people’s lives.

Connected relationships with caring and responsible adults provide numerous risk reduction benefits to youth.<sup>23</sup> By the inherent nature of the situation, many of the relationships incarcerated children have with adults after they are incarcerated are punitive in nature. MIO has been a leader in and is still one of the only entities in the state of Maine that provides programming inside LC that continues after incarcerated youth are released, meaning that inside programming participants can join outside programming and maintain the relationships with staff and other participants that were initiated while still inside the facility. The fact that MIO is one of the only programs that provides a continuity in its service delivery from inside LC to out in the community is critical to building authentic relationships between staff and participants that are wholly distinct from participants’ previous experience with adults that have been limited by the boundaries of a sanctioning system. MIO’s leadership in this area has been followed by more organizations to shift policies around how mentors and staff stay in touch with program participants post-release.

In small numbers, the youth that are emerging from LC and continuing with MIO programming are demonstrating the benefits of MIO intervention. With continued research and support, this programming model could have lasting impacts not only on the youth justice landscape in Maine, but also nationally.

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<sup>23</sup> Sieving, R., et al. (2017). Youth-Adult Connectedness: A Key Protective Factor for Adolescent Health. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, Vol. 52(3).